Quite a tall order.

No wonder most creative writers nowadays work in the fields of fantasy and science fiction, though even here mighty pitfalls loom, not least because nothing is ever totally original. I suppose if something is completely original, it might also be incomprehensible.

There's a problem of subconscious plagiarism. Thirty years ago, you read a story. Suddenly you come up with a brilliant idea. Unfortunately your brilliant idea is exactly the same as in that story, but you don't remember this.

In fact, about 30 years or 40 ago someone wrote a story relevant to this. I think the author was a woman, but I've completely forgotten her name and the name of the story. In her story lots of people all have the same wonderful dream, so they write it down as fiction and mail it to a magazine, which suddenly receives all these wonderful, moving, beautiful, and *identical* tales. Recently I was thinking of writing a story about memes – Richard Dawkins's "infectious ideas" (not a direct quotation, please note) – until I realized that this would basically be the same story that I'd read 30 or 40 years ago.

And then there is sheer coincidence...

Compared with not so long ago, nowadays there must be tens of thousands of eager fictionauts (many of whom, I hope, will be studying my advice). It's pretty much a cliché to say that science fiction and fantasy are genres which typically feed upon themselves and regurgitate and remix themselves. Because of this, coincidence is statistically likely. What's more, with supposedly new stuff always being the saleable doughnut (although admittedly often "in the great tradition of x, y, and z," for reader identification) the stale old stuff is out of print, and few fictionauts have read it. They have neither the opportunity nor the time. They may have had time to dip into clones of clones of old books and stories, but hardly into the originals. Thus the wheel can get re-invented a dozen times over (maybe in titanium instead of wood, but never mind). Similarities will abound.

This is where the safety-checker comes in.

Now that we all use quantum computers which operate thousands of times faster than the old silicon-chip machines, everything previously written has been scanned and stored. So while you're in the midst of writing a story, your safety-checker can continuously ensure that you aren't inadvertently echoing a pre-existing sentence or statistically significant phrase or a character name or situation or whatnot.

Furthermore, you wouldn't want to complete your own unique text and then discover that someone else had been busily writing something statistically similar at the very same time, would you? With quantum computers and the new data compression and Netting and Webbing, you and your safety-checker are on-line in real time while you're writing. Every word you write hangs out on the Net as you write it, notifying all fellow fictionauts' safety-checkers of what you're up to, staking your claim, as it were, and protecting you legally.

Suppose that you're a writer who can't get it all right the first time and who goes in for a lot of revisions? Embarrassing, that anybody can scrutinize your first clumsy draft? Not really! Some fans might get a Peeping Tom buzz out of watching their fave author at work, but pros haven't the time to bother. Actually, this might distract us, influence us, contaminate us, lead us astray, or dishearten us about the quality of what we ourselves are producing.

Basically the on-going interaction of everyone's safety-checkers is more like a horde of smart lawyers negotiating with each other down in some basement out of sight. It isn't more often than every ten minutes or so that a window opens in your text, flashing a prohibition, and a helpful menu of alternative suggestions.

If you *do* revise a lot, you can hardly lay claim to whole swathes of variant sentences and phrases and story variations – dog-in-the-manger fashion. Maybe this is what some amateurs might get up to. Paranoia is one of the besetting faults of amateur writers. Fear of theft of their intellectual property (which probably is worth diddly in any event).

So therefore, one stored set of deletions is protected by your safety-checker in case you have second thoughts; but no more than that. If you have third thoughts and fourth thoughts, this means that the first and second thoughts are up for public grabs – supposing that some parasite is looking over your electronic shoulder, hoping somehow to compile a saleable text out of the discarded scraps from hundreds of admired authors whose novels actually get downloaded onto portabooks or private-pressed for collectors. That isn't a very likely route to success for the novice! The jigsaw method. Avoid it.

Personally, I sometimes do have a third or fourth thought, and then a fifth – which is the first thought, revived – and I find that in the interim I've become blocked from using that particular eloquent phrase by the sheer coincidence of one my peers keyboarding it in the meantime. This is the one sort of writer's block you need to adjust to serenely. You can get emotionally attached to your words, and it's a nuisance to find that they've become somebody else's while you paused for that chug of coffee.

Then of course your safety-check is watching out for such things as any names of real people or businesses which occupy the same niche in real life as your imaginary creations. It's pretty okay if the real Roswald Dybbuk of Baltimore is a policeman, but not if he's a funeral director and that's the same job and the name and the city as you chose for your villain who harvests adrenal glands from corpses in his care. Which is why so many characters end up having names like Yorg Thrixx or Princess Smaragdina.

Also, the safety-check keeps an eye out for unfortunate metaphors and similes which you might use in the heat of the moment, and which might get you into trouble. It's fine to write "as drunk as a skunk" because skunks don't have any pressure group representing them, keeping an electronic eye out for slurs, but beware if you write "as pissed as a newt" even in a British context – bearing in mind a certain heavyweight politician of yore. Speaking of Britain, have you heard the one about the Welshman, the Scotsman and

by Thomas Frick, 1983 (published in edited form in *Paris Review*, 1984)

The Unlimited Dream Company *(1979)*

I remember my dreams extremely vividly. Not only can I remember last night's dreams, but I can remember vividly almost every dream I've ever had. I've never really drawn on my dreams for my own fiction, but in many ways I think of my imagination as a writer as a continuation of the dream time.

The Unlimited Dream Company is set in Shepperton, where I live. It's about a young pilot who steals a light aircraft and crashes into the Thames, and in a sense dies, is drowned in his aircraft, but frees himself by an enormous effort of the imagination and through his imagination transforms Shepperton into a kind of Edenic paradise full of exotic plants and animals. In many ways I feel that, without realizing it at the time, I was writing a piece of my own autobiography – that it's about the writer's imagination, and in particular my own imagination, transforming the humdrum reality that he occupies and turning it into an unlimited dream company.

– From the script of the 22-minute film *The Unlimited Dream Company* directed by Sam Scoggins (Royal College of Art, 1983)

"Report on an Unidentified Space Station" *(1982)*

"Report on an Unidentified Space Station" is one of the very few stories that I have written to be set in that happy hunting ground of traditional science fiction – outer space. Out of some hundred or more of my short stories, which fill some ten volumes, this is only the third to take place in deep space. Perhaps the silence of those infinite spaces, which so terrified Pascal, has at last begun to get through to me. However, readers of the story will see that this is, after all, a special kind of space, far closer to terra firma than it might seem at first, and even perhaps to inner space itself.

The story is also one of the very few of mine to be directly inspired by a dream – in this case, a nightmare of extreme anguish, though I like to think that the mood of the story is one of serenity and peace, part of the difference, it may be, between dream and imagination.

– Introduction to the story (*Top Fantasy: The Authors' Choice* ed. Josh Pachter, Dent, 1985)

"The Secret History of World War 3" *(1988)*

Ronald Reagan has been a long-standing interest of mine. My 1967 piece about him, "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan," later published in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, led to the first American edition being pulped at the orders of Nelson Doubleday. Yet a cooler reading of the piece, which virtually predicted a Reagan presidency, would have quickly confirmed all his admirers' real reasons for championing the then Governor of California. Reagan has always been a puzzle to the Europeans – how could a man so intellectually third-rate, so clearly incompetent, become chief executive of the world's most powerful and important nation? But the United States exists on a superior and altogether more advanced level to that of mundane Europe. There image is all, and Reagan's image, as it has evolved over the years from opportunist right-winger to national Grandaddy, reveals so much to us in our attempts to grasp the essence of American mass psychology.

– Introduction to the story (*The Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook Two* ed. David S. Garnett, Futura, 1989)

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